

The Monsters Under Your Bed

Story: The Monsters Under Your Bed

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Summary: At first, Kenichi thought he was worrying over nothing, but when Naoko asked whether he thought Subaru's recent attitude felt a bit strange, he knew it wasn't just his imagination. In his defence, Kenichi never considered time-travel an option.

Chapter 1: The Monsters Under Your Bed

Kenichi could still hear the faint echo of his wife's voice coming all the way from the second floor, above the sound of running water.

"Subaru, are you alright? Did you fall from your bed?"

Kenichi froze and a plate almost slipped from his hands. He had assumed that the loud noise from seconds before was Subaru dropping a toy, not him falling from his bed.

Drying his hands with a towel, he tossed it on the counter, and rushed to Subaru's room.

His son's bed wasn't that high, so he probably hadn't gotten hurt. No one would break a bone after falling from a thirty—okay, maybe *forty*—centimeter-tall bed.

Or so he kept telling himself, in a desperate attempt to calm down.

His wife was already sitting on the floor next to Subaru's empty bed when he opened the door. A bundle of blankets moved and untangled itself close to her, until it finally revealed his seven-year-old son's face.

Subaru inhaled a sharp breath. "What...? *E—Emilia*, where are...?"

'Who?' Kenichi wondered while poking his head out the doorframe.

Still wrapped with his favorite Pokemon blankets and struggling to break free from the bedspreads, Subaru looked surprisingly similar to a burrito.

Or better yet, a *suburrito*.

A toothy smile blossomed on Kenichi's face.

Only then Subaru seemed to notice Naoko and him. His eyes darted around wildly as he pushed the blanket away and twitched away from them.

"Did you have a nightmare?" Naoko asked, lips slightly primed.

Instead of replying, Subaru stiffened. Kenichi translated it to a yes.

Taking a deep breath, Kenichi gasped and pulled the fakest frown he could master.

"What?! No nightmare is allowed to enter our household, such a crime cannot go unpunished!" he loudly proclaimed, trying to distract Subaru.

He deflated a little when Subaru *still* didn't reply and continued staring blankly instead — sweating with a pale and somewhat haunted expression Kenichi didn't want to see in any child, especially not his own.

...What kind of nightmare could Subaru have had to end up like this? Unsure about how to proceed, he met Naoko's eyes with his own.

"Hush, it was just a nightmare." Naoko, bless her heart, hugged Subaru tighter and interrupted Kenichi before he could ask what was wrong—or even worse, make another badly timed joke.

Their son blinked, startled like a deer caught in the headlights. "What...? Is this you, Echidna? Is this your idea of a joke? Because it really isn't funny."

Kenichi raised his eyebrows. Now, what did that even mean? Was Echidna a classmate of his? It sounded more like a moniker or nickname than a Japanese name.

Naoko cuddled Subaru closer, oblivious to her husband's growing discomfort. "Do you want to sleep with us tonight?"

For an entire minute, Kenichi just stayed quiet and watched Subaru curl under Naoko's embrace.

"Y—yes," Subaru finally spoke, voice shaking. "I would love that—I really want that. Be with you both."

The muscles in his face tightened as he forced a smile. His unfocused eyes and the way his son phrased the sentence put Kenichi off again. The structure, the tone—something triggered every alarm in his brain. For some reason he couldn't explain, he was fairly sure that Subaru's nightmare hadn't been a normal one.

"...Why don't you both go first?" he pushed himself to say, trying and probably failing to look calm. Subaru's question still repeated in his mind like a broken record. Echidna was a name, right? Just like Emilia? What did he mean by joke?

Naoko nodded, picking the suburrito into her arms and hugging it close before waltzing out of the room. "Very well!" she smiled, ignoring Subaru's desperate yell of 'S—stop,' as he latched onto her shirt.

The door closed behind Naoko and Subaru with a soft *tap*.

Now alone, he took note of how bigger the bedroom seemed without either of them. It made him painfully uncomfortable.

With his heart beating wildly against his chest, Kenichi walked towards Subaru's closet.

...It was stupid. Kenichi's parents had always said he was too paranoid for his own good, but only checking the room himself would allow him to go to sleep in peace.

Trying to even his breath, he grabbed the closet's handle. And with a piercing *chiiirp*, it opened.

—nothing was there.

No terrifying face that would haunt both his and his son's nightmares for the rest of their lives hid in the tiny place. Only Subaru's clothes, a soccer ball they never truly used, and his PlayStation games.

A small sigh escaped his throat as he shook his head. It had only been a weird nightmare, of course it had only been a nightmare.

Breathing deeply, he felt a heavy weight lift from his shoulders.

Nothing was amiss, therefore, Kenichi could finally relax.

When Kenichi finally bounced out of Subaru's room and walked towards his own, he found Naoko and their son sitting at the edge of their bed wearing their respective pajamas.

"Is there anything wrong?" She asked, still hugging a dazed Subaru.

Kenichi rubbed his back, trying to come up with a decent excuse. "Nothing at all. I was just...making sure no monsters were hiding under the bed!" He didn't feel comfortable enough to voice his previous fears, not yet and especially not in front of Subaru.

"In fact," he continued, proudly puffing his chest and shifting his expression to a more serious one. "There was one hiding behind a half-eaten cookie—it was big, green and terribly ugly, but I defeated it bravely."

Naoko laughed, a bell-like sound that made him fall in love with her all over again. Grabbing his hands, she played along with his theatrics. "My hero is so brave."

Kenichi nodded shamelessly. "Yes, yes I am," he agreed, gaining yet another chuckle from his wife. "Enough to deserve a kiss, too."

She playfully rolled her eyes before leaning in to kiss him, only to stop centimeters before meeting his lips. "Did you finish washing the dishes?"

Gasping, Kenichi dropped to his knees.

"Noooo!" He lamented as he fake-punched the floor with his fist. "My nemesis!"

Subaru watched the conversation come and go. For once in his life, silent as a tomb.

At first, Kenichi thought he was worrying over nothing, but when Naoko asked whether he thought Subaru's recent attitude felt a bit strange, he knew it wasn't just his imagination.

Subaru hadn't been acting *wrong*, just—

—*off character*.

Subaru's small quirks that Kenichi never even noticed became much more prominent the day they simply disappeared. While Subaru still played with his toys, smiled, and went to school, his vocabulary changed to a more mature one, he started paying more attention to his surroundings and no longer wasted food, walked around barefoot or complained about being forced to take Naoko's hand.

It was odd, seeing his child and not recognizing every single detail about his persona, but probably in the same way that Subaru waking up early had been unusual before the nightmare—which meant it was the new normal and Kenichi just wasn't used to it yet.

Kenichi kept repeating to himself that Subaru was a growing child, and as such, changes were expected. But not even those reassuring thoughts stopped the crippling fear from crawling its way into his chest.

He opened the entrance door with a soft click. The wooden floor crunched under his shoes as he entered the house, the chilly winter air no longer nipping at his cheeks.

Naoko neither got comfortable nor took her coat off, instead she stepped in the middle of the living room and met Kenichi's troubled eyes with her own. "Subaru, would it be better if we went to the park less?"

Subaru froze near the stairs, startled by his mom's sudden question.

"Huh—?! What brought this on? Why would I?!" Subaru, caught off guard by Naoko's question, stumbled over his words. "I like the park. Playing tag is fun."

"Then why...?" Kenichi barely managed to hide his frown as Subaru rushed towards their side again.

If Subaru's attitude at home was odd, then he was a completely different person when he was with his friends. The group's dynamic had changed, and Kenichi still couldn't pin-point exactly why. Whatever the case, Subaru was spending more and more time building sandcastles on his own instead of playing ninja with the rest of the children, and neither Naoko nor him felt like ignoring the topic anymore.

"Why what?" Subaru blinked, feigning innocence with wide, big eyes.

"It just looked like you weren't having a good time, that's all," Kenichi mused.

"It's nothing," Subaru waved him off, pouting. "Really, dad, worrying over something so stupid," he finished with a huff.

"You can tell us," Kenichi insisted, trying to play it as if it was a mundane conversation instead of something that made him lose sleep over six days a week. "Did you fight with the other children?"

"It's not—"

—Because if you did, you better have won."

"I did not!" Subaru squawked, looking anywhere else but at him. "I mean, I didn't get into a fight. But if I had— *and I did not*, I would have definitely won," he mumbled after a short pause.

He crossed his arms and nodded in agreement, even though he inwardly wanted to dismiss everything his son said and continue pressing.

Because if Subaru hadn't gotten into a fight, then there was a chance that something bigger and more worrisome had happened, and Kenichi wasn't brave enough to consider that.

"Say, Subaru," Naoko interrupted, making them turn over to face her. She stood next to the kitchen with an unreadable face. "What do you say if we go to the cinema tomorrow?"

Kenichi huffed and waited for Subaru to immediately turn down Naoko's offer. Even if Subaru no longer enjoyed the park as much as he did before, his child still was stubborn to the bone. Subaru always returned to the park on Sundays, and he hated missing even a single day.

—but maybe not anymore.

Because even when a second became two, Subaru continued staring at her, deep in thought.

Kenichi blinked, unused to watching his son *think*.

Finally, Subaru gave a slight nod and lowered his gaze towards the floor. "Actually..." he chipped, making Kenichi look up. "I heard the dojo some streets away gives kendo classes for the entire family on Sundays, and I thought we could join..."

Asking to learn kendo wasn't the same as stating he didn't enjoy visiting the park anymore, but it was a near thing: a step in the right direction.

Thus, Kenichi grinned and rushed towards Subaru to give him a bear hug so big they both fell to the floor.

"Gwaaa—?!" Subaru squawked from under his heavy weight. "Ge' off!"

"So you want to take kendo classes with your father, eh?" He cackled. "Very well, I won't lose!"

Subaru groaned, failing to get back on his feet. "As if, old man—I will totally kick your ass, and everyone will know someone the size of an eight-year-old kicked your butt!"

"My ass?! Never!" he gasped and pushed Subaru even closer to the ground. "And who has been teaching you those words? Because it wasn't the owner of this handsome ass. Naoko, do something about—"

Instead of replying or letting him go on, she clapped slowly, immediately halting their fight. "Naoko will go to the dojo tomorrow morning to see if we can enroll. After all, classes already started some time ago."

Kenichi leapt to his feet. "Yes! I will go with you—no, better yet—let's all go together!" He nodded with a smile. Those were family classes, after all.

And when Subaru smiled, Kenichi could almost pretend he didn't notice the bags under his eyes.

Subaru whizzed down the stairs and barrelled into Naoko, crashing her with enough strength to make her feet shake but not move from her place. "Subaru, no running inside the house."

"Dad runs all the time," Subaru pointed out.

"Not in the kitchen when I'm holding a *knife*," Naoko stressed, showing him she had been chopping vegetables until seconds before.

Kenichi continued munching a bread loaf and pretended he didn't hear their conversation—only pausing when he noticed Subaru had let go of her hip and was now beaming in his direction instead.

He blinked.

Subaru opened his arms wide. "I know what I want for Christmas!"

Resuming his munching, Kenichi met Naoko's eyes curiously.

"That's great Suwuru, but it's still only Marchw..." he tried to swallow down the bread before continuing. After eight years raising Subaru, he already discovered the way to recognize the barely concealed mischief in his eyes.

And in that moment, Kenichi could see lots of mischief sparkling there.

"Christmas is in December," he added after a short pause, clearer.

"I know that! But this is something that needs time," Subaru pressed on.

Kenichi nodded, already expecting him to say another *shinai* to practice Kendo with or even a new console game he heard from his classmates.

"I want a little brother."

—Kenichi choked on air.

Subaru pushed a paper towards Kenichi's face. "I wrote a letter and everything."

Kenichi grabbed it, a bit baffled. His son always wrote the Christmas letter with them.

'Dear Santa, please give me a little brother to protect and cherish forever', it read. The paper even had a *smiley face* and the drawing of a family of four at the bottom. He slowly turned to look at Naoko in horror. "Help," he begged.

He couldn't say no to smiley faces. Everything but that.

Naoko waited for Kenichi to start breathing normally again before sliding down next to him. "Subaru, that's not something you can ask for Christmas."

Kenichi nodded between coughs.

"Why not?" Subaru asked with fake, innocent eyes.

Naoko lowered her gaze and tapped her chin with a long, skinny finger. "Because siblings are big commitments, they aren't a toy you can throw away when bored."

"I wouldn't throw away my brother!"

The fire that sparked in Subaru's eyes at the thought would have made Kenichi proud, had the situation been slightly different. But as bright as that brittle, glimmering light was, his son still was only a child.

"Even so, you are only a child, and a new family member would bring many changes, changes that we simply can't afford," Naoko continued, as if reading his mind.

Subaru blinked, and a part of Kenichi wondered if the surprise in his face was because he hadn't expected Naoko would take his request seriously enough to give him an actual explanation. Biting his lips, he turned to stare at Naoko. "And, what would need to change for you to afford it?"

Naoko smiled and put a hand on Subaru's cheek, caressing it softly. "I'm not sure, but whatever it is, it isn't something that can be decided in a single day."

Perhaps, his one mistake had been expecting Subaru to drop the subject. But as he watched Subaru return to his usual smile more and more every day, the less Kenichi regretted it.

"—but *moom*, it isn't fair when I spar with you, you are too tall—I need someone my size to practice kendo with, like a little sibling! What...? *No, mom*, my classmates don't count..."

"—what do you mean you are too busy? You said that *yesterday* already, let's play! If I had a little sibling this wouldn't be a problem..."

"—Look dad, I cleaned both my bedroom and the bathroom, entirely on my own. Because I'm a good, mature, and reliable teenager— hey, don't laugh! I'm totally a teenager, 'kay!"

"—this classmate said that her family parties were really fun because she had lots of cousins and relatives. And it reminded me that I don't have a single cousin! And I don't have siblings, so my future children will be cousinless too—".

"*Future children?*" Kenichi repeated, petrified. He was way too young to be a grandfather! "Subaru, you are nine. Why are you even thinking about future children?"

Was that why Subaru now did so well in class? Was he trying to impress a girl already?!

Subaru cocked his head to the side, his light brown eyes shining bright. "You don't know when I'm going to cross paths with a beautiful and silver haired half elf who lost her entire family—except her flying, murderous cat—at the hands of a psychotic loli. She would be in dire need of relatives. Duh."

"H—Huh?" Kenichi snapped out of his trance, blinking. That...was oddly specific. "Ah, for a moment I thought you were growing too fast. Seems I was worrying over nothing," he mumbled, taking a deep, calming breath.

"Wha— Hey old man, what's that supposed to mean?"

A toothy grin was Kenichi's only response.

Because the more he thought about it, the better Subaru's idea sounded. Many Subarus and Naokos of different sizes, running around the house, trying their best to stab him with their toy swords...

Even the mental image lifted the corners of his mouth.

Still trying and failing to fix his tie, Kenichi leaned out the window to have a better view of Subaru and his classmates running across the sports field below. A girl was chasing them while they tried to run away—*right*, probably playing tag, then.

When she switched targets and pointed towards Subaru instead, Kenichi's lips turned upwards. His son was fast, much faster than he had been at his age.

"Mr. Natsuki, thank you for coming," Subaru's teacher walked into the room and greeted him with a smile, interrupting his train of thought and forcing him to leave the window to shake her hand. "I'm sorry you were summoned with so little notice."

"I'm a father—talking about Subaru is a joy, not a problem."

"Joy, I see," she raised a scruffy eyebrow, causing Kenichi to halt. What did that even mean? "Mr. Natsuki, do you recognize this note?"

Hesitantly and with a frown, Kenichi grabbed the offered paper. It was a note from the headmistress, with a curt reply below it. His eyes immediately jumped to the bottom of the page and the signature on it.

It had been years since he last sent a note to Subaru's school. Subaru was independent enough to not ask for help, and Naoko was resourceful enough to take care on her own of any event that required parental supervision.

So, how did the teacher get a note signed by him?

Kenichi didn't reply, and instead began reading the letter. *'As grateful as we are for the aforementioned distinction, Subaru does not intend to skip a year, so a meeting won't be needed to...'*

Skipping a year. Aforementioned distinctions.

Kenichi was having trouble understanding those words. His eyes traced the sentences time and time again, each time paying greater attention. The calligraphy was different from his, yet similar enough to fool most of his friends. The *m*'s, *n*'s and *s*'s were slightly rounder than his. But the resemblance between the rest of the letters was uncanny.

He felt short of breath.

It was stupid. It was ridiculous, but it wasn't the fact someone—probably Subaru—had forged his signature what scared him the most. No. He didn't care about the content of the letter either.

Why would Subaru keep such a big achievement to himself? Why hide?

"Do I take this as a no, Mr. Natsuki?"

Kenichi doubled down on his silence.

The door opened from a kick. "Dad!"

"Subaru!" The teacher yelled. "What do you think you are doing!?"

"—what is he doing here?!" Subaru paused to take a ragged breath. "Dad should be at work!"

Kenichi unconsciously crumpled the paper, observing the way his son went quiet at the sight of the note in his hand.

"You are in big trouble," the teacher hissed. "Forging a document is—"

Only then, time resumed for him.

"Forge—who said anything about forge?" Kenichi snapped out of his daze. "My son said he didn't want to skip a year, thus I sent a letter stating that was the case. Nothing was forged."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"Isn't it right, Subaru?"

Subaru would spend the rest of the year grounded. No dojo, no park, no computer, no *anything*. But only because he did something highly illegal and hid information from them—not because he chose not to skip a year. As proud as he was, Kenichi agreed skipping a year wouldn't be the best option.

Nonetheless, Subaru gawked back at him with an equally confused expression. "... Yes?"

A frown pulled at the teacher's lips. "Are you sure this is the choice you want to make?"

He raised an eyebrow, slightly offended by her question. He planned to ground his child, but getting him in trouble at school wasn't the way he wanted to do it. "I know how to raise my child."

The teacher didn't reply, but the way her lips turned downward showed openly how much she disagreed.

Kenichi disagreed with the common belief that "Parents know best." On the contrary, he believed them to be biased, narrow minded, and foolishly naïve—especially when their own children were concerned.

That night repeated in Kenichi's mind like a broken record. A nightmare, a whisper and his son's dull gaze.

Kenichi had been narrow minded before. He still was. But as he watched Subaru bury himself deeper into the couch, a trail of tears still marring his face, he understood playing pretend was no longer an option.

He should have done something years ago. He should have investigated the people from the park better, verified the windows were properly closed, the attic, *everything*.

"Subaru—"

Subaru turned his eyes away. "It was nothing. You shouldn't worry about it."

"A panic attack is *not* nothing." From the other side of the coffee table, Kenichi tried his best to regain his composure. "A panic attack is *never* nothing," he stressed, terribly close to one himself.

"I wasn't panicking. I had no reason to panic," Subaru grabbed the border of the coffee table, looking anywhere else but at him. "I just..."

Silence stretched between them.

Taking a deep breath, Subaru finally met his gaze. "I think I might be allergic to bunnies."

What. Kenichi stared dumbly at his son.

"*Bunnies*," Kenichi repeated, almost as if tasting the word. "You think you might have recently developed an allergy to...*bunnies*?"

He had expected an excuse, but he hadn't anticipated such a blatant lie.

His son's calm expression didn't waver as he nodded, and Kenichi wondered, not for the first time, if Subaru really thought so little of him so as to believe that a simple smile would calm him down. He realized years ago how good of an actor his oldest child was, he just pretended not knowing because living in denial was easier than accepting that maybe, he was a terrible father.

Parents were biased, narrow minded and foolishly naïve. Kenichi Natsuki didn't consider himself an exception.

"Yeah, our teacher said it was possible! And Nagisa brought her bunny to school today. She even tried to make me *pet it*. Anyway— Nagisa said she won't bring it again anytime soon, so I probably won't see any more rabbits for a while. *I think*," He continued, talking very, very quickly, not taking a single second to breath between sentences and not sounding like a child at all.

Suddenly, Subaru stood up and walked towards the kitchen. "And when is mom arriving? *I'm hungry!* We should cook something together while we wait for her!"

Kenichi disregarded Subaru's terrible attempt at diverting the topic and focused on his appearance instead— on his fake smile and the disheveled uniform he wore.

Nagisa's wasn't the first bunny Subaru met. Kenichi himself had seen a baby Subaru play with bunnies years ago— back when he didn't have nightmares or panic attacks.

His son's words felt like a bad joke.

Most of all—they felt like a punch in the face.

He stood up and walked towards him to take his hand. "That's enough," he whispered, acid raising up his throat.

"—something preferably without veggies because those taste terrible and..."

Subaru used his remaining hand to open the fridge, but Kenichi slammed it shut.

"I said enough." Kenichi repeated.

Subaru stiffened.

"You don't have to pretend you are happy all the time. You don't have to hide your feelings from us. I'm here for you—we all are." He grabbed his son's shoulders. "What's really going on, Subaru?"

"—We are worried, Naoko and I." At those words, Subaru's mouth closed with an audible click. "We want to help you, we want to see you safe, but we don't even know what's wrong. We can't help you if you don't tell us what's wrong. We love you and want you to be happy more than anything in the world."

Subaru continued staring blankly at the floor, and Kenichi's determination began to waver. His son was ten, not five, he could understand what he meant, right? Was he expecting too much from a child?

When his son shut his eyes. Kenichi concluded that yes, Subaru understood perfectly what he meant. Subaru was much smarter than the average child, even if he enjoyed fooling around and failing exams on purpose.

Subaru's trembling hands grabbed his own. "I'm—" he took a deep breath. "I'm—"

Kenichi leaned forward and hugged his son firmly. And when a minute became ten, he pretended he didn't hear the sniffles echoing in the room.

"I'm sorry," Subaru choked, before burying his face in the crook of Kenichi's neck. "I'm

—
He couldn't understand it. He couldn't get it. His son excelled at school, befriended other children easily, Naoko and he were supportive. So, *why*?

"You have done nothing wrong," Kenichi cut him off. "Whoever told you or put that stupid idea in your brain is wrong."

"It's my fault, I messed up," he replied, sobbing harder. "If I hadn't— I'm so—"

—was it Emilia?"

Subaru twisted out of his touch, flinching so hard his back hit the wall behind him.

"W—What." Subaru breathed, staring at him wide eyed.

His throat closed as he watched Subaru's expression go from horror to confusion to— something else he couldn't pinpoint.

Kenichi didn't want his son to shake or squirm under his gaze, but also didn't know what else to do. He couldn't pretend a panic attack was a product of his paranoid imagination. He needed to start asking questions.

With every second Kenichi remained silent, Subaru turned more and more anxious, shaking, his eyes darting around the room. "Dad...where did you hear that name?"

Kenichi bit his lip, wishing he could take the question back. But time travel didn't exist, and he couldn't back off now, not when the most important question still rested on the tip of his tongue.

—Or maybe *Echidna*?" Kenichi didn't bother to hide the hatred in his voice. It was refreshing— finally uttering the name that had starred his nightmares for the last three years.

Subaru tensed, but he wasn't sure whether it was from his question or from the solemn, somewhat desperate, "Subaru...?" that left his mouth.

Subaru took another step away from him and turned expressionless once again.

Kenichi let him go, hesitant, wondering if he had pushed too much. Had he made yet another mistake he will never be able to take back? He stopped talking, waiting for Subaru to collect his thoughts.

Subaru's clouded eyes shared no information as they studied his dad's face— they just looked intently around the room, trying to find something that Kenichi didn't know what was—until Subaru stiffened, and a rough noise escaped his throat.

Slowly, Subaru hid his face with his hands, and then his next breath was caught on a hiccup.

But his son didn't cry. "Pf..."

No—Subaru *cackled*,

"Gwahahah!"

Dread crept through Kenichi's back, just like vines crept through a fence. "Subaru...?"

"—I knew it was too good to be true," Subaru finally said, standing up with a big, bitter smile adorning his face. "I just fucking knew it. Deep down, I think I always knew."

Kenichi felt his heart skip a beat. "Subaru, what are you—?"

"—cut the crap, Echidna." His son hissed, unhinged distaste lacing his tone.

Kenichi froze, watching in shock and disbelief the unfamiliar anger in his son's eyes aimed at him.

"I can't believe I ever thought you to have a human heart— You are a wretched, cursed, disgusting monster. Did you have fun, making me go through all this *again*?"

"Subaru?" Kenichi tried again, in a daze.

"*Stop wearing his face!*" Subaru snarled, taking a step forward. "Stop, stop, stop—stop!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, a broken voice Kenichi had trouble relating to his son. "If you don't stop—"

Subaru opened the drawer near them. "I will bring *her* here! She invaded your garden once, she—"

The *kitchen* drawer, where Naoko and he kept the cutlery.

"Put that down!" He shrieked, tackling Subaru, his eyes glued to the knife in his hand.

Subaru twisted out of the way, but still was only a child, and Kenichi had the advantage of the size. Hovering over his side, he yanked Subaru by the arm and kicked him in the stomach, causing Subaru to fall limp to the floor.

Kenichi jumped on top of his son, but even while struggling to break free from his father's weight, his hold over the kitchen knife remained strong. "Get off!"

"Drop the knife!"

"Agh—Shut up! Shut up!" Subaru muffled screams echoed between coughs. "I told you to stop wearing his face!"

Kenichi had no time to think over how much of a terrible idea grabbing a knife by the edge was. He simply did, for he needed it out of his son's hand.

Numb pain pierced his hand as blood dripped down his fingers, staining his shirt and the wooden floor red. It was wet and sticky, but hardly something that currently mattered to him.

Subaru let go of the knife in shock, and Kenichi yanked it out of his reach.

He threw the cursed weapon at the other side of the room, and it landed several meters away from them, with a tingling sound and leaving red spots on its wake.

Blood continued pouring heavily from his hand, but he hardly felt the wound. His heart raced out of his chest, leaving him without breath. "You called for those people year

ago, back when you—"

He held Subaru down with both his hands, and he finally stopped moving.

"—that night three years ago," Kenichi cried out. "All those years ago."

Subaru stared at him.

"Calm down," Kenichi begged, maybe to Subaru, maybe to himself. "Anything that troubles you can be fixed. Everything will be okay. This is not the way out."

Subaru's face remained pale and motionless, not uttering a single word.

Kenichi didn't cry—no. Only after Naoko arrived and helped him go to the hospital, he finally allowed himself to weep.

Depression was not a linear thing, as Kenichi learnt from Subaru's experience, and it manifested in different ways.

Just like after summer came the winter breeze, Subaru spent weeks, sometimes months at a time playing and laughing until his cheeks ached, only to wake up the following day with a slight tremble and the desperate need to tell his parents he was sorry.

It would last for some days, then he would hug them, gift them a shy, tentative smile, and everything would be okay for a short, blissful moment as flowers blossomed again.

Therapy helped the happy moments last longer, but gloomy nights still occasionally returned.

"What would you do if you started from zero?" Subaru asked, while taking a sip of his cold cocoa, shortly after talking with his shrink.

Kenichi didn't think much of Subaru's question at first. He continued chopping the vegetables, praying he finished dinner before Naoko arrived. "What do you mean?" He replied offhand.

He should have started earlier, *damn it*.

His fifteen years old son muttered something in reply that Kenichi was too distracted cursing his own laziness to understand.

"If you could time travel to when you were seven, what would you do?" Subaru finally clarified, after a short pause.

"Win the lottery," Kenichi smirked and turned to Subaru. "Buy Naoko that dress she liked so much the other day but was already unavailable."

Subaru scoffed, nostrils flaring.

"*HA!* That's bullshit!" He narrowed his eyes. "You don't know the numbers from today, much less from fifty years ago! You would fail. Completely!"

Kenichi only resisted the temptation to rush over to the computer and check them because Subaru seemed to genuinely care about the question.

Subaru crossed his arms, and Kenichi finally realized his son hadn't been staring at the ceiling but at the television in the wall instead.

"At the end of the day, you wouldn't be able to change much," Subaru said, glaring daggers at the screen.

A journalist with bored eyes and a black blazer talked about a cold case from another city. If his memory served him right, it was about a woman that had gone missing the previous summer and was found dead shortly afterwards.

Subaru clenched his fists. "People die every day. Unless you memorized every single detail about their death, you wouldn't be able to save them. Even if it was a natural catastrophe and you knew the day, no one would believe you."

"Time traveler or not, it wouldn't be your duty to save them," Kenichi replied scratching his head awkwardly, a bit put off by the nature of the question. "Your duty is to be happy and save yourself. That's all there is." He clapped his hands together, emphasizing that really, it's that simple.

Subaru's lips turned downwards. "I wouldn't be able to live with it. Not helping them. I don't think so. Especially if—"

"That's stupid," Kenichi cut off with a frown. "Never set yourself on fire to keep others warm."

Subaru cocked his head. "...You wouldn't do it?"

"Pff," He snickered, leaning back in his chair. "Of course not. Instead of aiming for something impossible like becoming a *shounen* hero, I would make Naoko fall in love with me again."

"But she might not fall in love with you. You were a different person twenty-nine years ago. She didn't live a life besides you. She might even find your jokes off-putting."

Kenichi pouted. "You have so little faith in your dad. I will have you know that your mother has always said she finds my jokes endearing." He put a hand on his chest so as to emphasize his words.

Subaru rolled his eyes.

"—But most of all, I'm disappointed you underestimate your mom so badly."

Kenichi shut his eyes and sighed, picturing the day he first met Naoko. The pink ribbon in her hair and the blush in her cheeks after she ran over him with her bike. He could recall the instant perfectly, from the date to the exact spot where it happened. "Nothing can come between true love, not even time."

Subaru snickered, and then laughed, an eerily similar sound to Naoko's laugh. "That's so cheesy, dad."

When the conversation died out, the journalist on the screen continued rambling, this time talking about the next elections.

"So you would just do everything again? The exact same?" he asked again after some minutes.

"Well, not the exact same." Kenichi mused, smiling slightly. "I would worry less. I would only focus on the present because I know everything is going to ultimately be fine."

"—but what if it isn't?"

Kenichi raised his eyebrows, surprised by Subaru's retort.

His son stared at him with big, attentive eyes. Kenichi didn't know why he cared so much about such an impossibility, but he knew better than to ignore a question Subaru felt so passionate about.

Kenichi thought about that day, five years ago, and how much Subaru had progressed. Most of all, he thought about the first words his son had said after they returned from the hospital, and how many times he had asked if he was allowed to believe it wasn't a dream.

"I think it is," Kenichi offered gently, with a soft smile on his face. "And if it isn't, I trust that we are going to make it better, one step at a time."

Subaru's old Christmas wish came true more than eight years later, when Karin Natsuki was welcomed into the world.

"She is perfect," Subaru mumbled, caressing her cheek.

At the cold and unexpected touch, his baby sister squirmed and buried herself deeper into Naoko's embrace. She didn't cry, unlike Kenichi who was a second away from starting to sob again.

Instead, he took yet another picture with his phone. Children grew much too fast, but photographs were forever. "She looks exactly like her mom."

"We both look like red potatoes, yes," Naoko agreed playfully, still resting in bed and gaining a chuckle from the rest of the family.

"Take care," Naoko said with a little wave of her hand, the moment she caught a glimpse of Subaru's silhouette near the door.

Nodding, Subaru's hand gripped the handle harder. He opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out of it.

After five minutes watching Subaru standing still next to the door, Kenichi went down the stairs and sighed. "Honestly son, we have more than enough mayo for this meal," he cut off, raising an eyebrow and making Subaru flinch away from the door in surprise. "You don't have to go to the mart if you don't want to."

He adored mayo as much as any other sane man, but they already had half a jar. They really didn't need Subaru to go and fetch more in the middle of the night, especially when he looked ready to drop dead, with a pale face and big bags under his eyes.

His son stared at him blankly, shoulders tense.

"Su-ba-ru?" He insisted, after yet another pause.

At his name, Subaru finally broke out of his daze, and met his eyes with his own.

"...Would it really be okay if I stayed here for a little longer?" He asked, voice a little rough.

Kenichi tilted his head, confused. "Of course? More like for the entire night though, it's almost dinner time..." He turned towards the TV and winced, noticing how late it exactly was. Karin had been sleeping for an hour now.

"If you aren't going, set the table please." Naoko called from the kitchen.

"...okay," Subaru's lips turned slightly upwards, letting his finger slip off the handle. "I will do so."

A chill went down Kenichi's spine minutes later, when he realized Subaru had left the house without either of them noticing. But it wasn't until he caught sight of Subaru's set of keys, still next to the couch, that Kenichi began to feel dread.

Only the following day, after Subaru had been missing for eleven hours, Naoko found a little note next to his bed.

I wish to one day be able to explain why I'm doing this.

Until then, I hope you can forgive me.

I will be fine, please don't worry about me.

Your son, Subaru.